



If you sense it coming, it may be too late: the digital screen as a window into warfare. Art Review – *I Saw the World End* (2020)

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Abstract

In an increasingly digitised reality, our interactions with war are often filtered through the screen. This review, *If you sense it coming, it may be too late: the digital screen as a window into warfare*, focuses on Es Devlin and Machiko Weston's *I Saw the World End* (2020) as an enmeshing of distanced spectatorship and an abstract intimacy that provides a window into warfare. The digital artist's collaborative conceptualisation of the 1945 atomic bombings entangles a virtual and physical co-presence through its publicly networked projection. The artwork *I Saw the World End* enacts a personal, societal, and cultural dialogue for the past and future on the atrocities of warfare and the fragility of humanity, epitomizing digital's art's innate responsibility to bear witness and critique such events.

Keywords War · Digital media · Public sphere · Digital aesthetic · Cultural trauma

“In a dark time, the eye begins to see”

Theodore Roethke, 1948

This work isn't your standard pictorial expression of war. There aren't explicit images of gore, conflict-torn landscapes or towns. *I Saw the World End* (3) is instead a conceptual visualisation in response to an undeniable trauma – the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. The ten-minute digital film evokes a subtle violence that creeps up on the spectator with its skewed orchestral score, lamenting vocals and glitching soundwave animation.

I Saw the World End is a video artwork commissioned by the London Imperial War Museum as part of their *Victory 75* (2020) exhibition; in an exploration of the Second World War coming to an end. The work is a digital collaboration between English media artist Es Devlin and Japanese designer Machiko Weston who, in working through the Covid-19 lockdown, were divided between their respective studios. Devlin and Weston integrate this separation, their recurring motif of division, throughout the work's audiovisuals as an expression of personal, societal, and cultural ruptures in the consequence of nuclear warfare (Thornberry,

2020, as cited in Dezeen, 2020). The video installation engages with a digital aesthetic that is experienced in an intermingling of physical and virtual space.

Digital art is afforded multiple lives through this interaction of the virtual and real. The digitisation of art exacerbates an accessibility not previously afforded to “traditional” manifestations of art. Devlin and Weston's work taps into just this: a digitally networked public sphere that denotes a wider mode of spectatorship and experience. *I Saw the World End* exists in a state of co-presence – both virtually and physically – where its broadcast on the ‘Piccadilly Lights’ screen at Piccadilly Circus affords the video work the first of these many lives. It is in this public and physical space of the London road junction where *I Saw the World End* was scheduled to be presented twice: at 8:10 am GMT 6 August 2020 and 11:00 am GMT 8 August 2020. These specific times are an almost exact mark for the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki 75 years ago.

In Piccadilly Circus, this co-presence of spectatorship is established in the use of digital technologies. Despite physically sharing the same space and viewing the same screen, a sense of division surfaces in the experience of sound where each individual is afforded access to the accompanying soundtrack by connecting to a local Wi-Fi network *isawtheworldend* and listening through their individual headphones. During these screenings, the film would be simultaneously played on the Imperial War Museum's website (a concurrent second life). Weeks on from its premier

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broadcast, *I Saw the World End* is readily available for streaming (a third, and thereafter infinite sequence of lives) through Devlin's online portfolio, Vimeo, Instagram and various websites. This release of the film ensures an accessibility and continued multiplicity of viewer engagement.

However, the devised split of the work's experience across time and locale situates the viewer as a separate entity, in passive witness to the film's content. This rationale is reminiscent of Anne Friedberg's theoretical framings in *The Virtual Window* (7). In deconstructing the experience of the digital screen through Friedberg's metaphor of a window, mirror or portal, a deeper understanding of the relationship and interaction between screen and viewer manifests.

In the instance of *I Saw the World End*, the work can be seen to function as a window. Whether the film is watched on the 45-m Piccadilly Lights display or a 13-inch personal laptop there is a reinforced distance of spectatorship. This distance is amplified in the temporal space between the 1945 atomic detonation and our current day of 2020. *I Saw the World End* offers a conceptual glimpse into the bombing's horrors, of which the vast majority of its audience (young dwellers of the city or the internet) will never have experienced. It must be acknowledged that this may perhaps be the closest I have ever come to witnessing political turmoil turned to violence in my young life, and thus my reading of the work cannot fully comprehend the atrocities and struggle of war in anything more than the passive manner through this "window."

But this does not mean that I'm unable to be conscious of such gravity. Applying Friedberg's theoretical framing device of the screen as a window initiates a self-reflexive process where it is in the hands of the viewer to absorb and regurgitate the content of the work beyond its surface level aesthetics.

"Dear young people who have never experienced war,
wars begin covertly"

Takato Michishita, Nagasaki survivor, 00:06:10.

Devlin and Weston's voices, reading in English and Japanese respectively, build upon one another in an interchange of fact and fiction. Devlin intertwines lines from H.G. Wells's ominous *The World Set Free* (1913) in which the author predicts the imminent invention of a "source of power so potent," with lines from Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard and the Manhattan Project whose works—albeit devastatingly—were fundamental in the development of nuclear power. Weston lends her voice to read often confronting first-hand accounts of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors in Japanese, her native tongue. This contrast of language is visualised in the horizontal soundwave's splitting of the screen.

Sound plays an integral role in the experience of the work. The duo collaborated with the sound design studio Polyphonia to create a composition embodying the notion

of splitting and was realised through Binaural Recording. This innovative digital technology utilises two microphones to record, thus enabling the separation of audio between the right and left ears upon listening. The bilingual recordings of the two artists are overlaid with a score of low drums, eerie strings and echoing vocals that undulate throughout, lending an emotive depth to the film. Set against this, in my initial listening, I found that it was the first-hand accounts which were the most powerful. Though there was no visual representation of the survivor or their personalised voices there was an overpowering sense of sorrow and trauma. A line from Nagasaki survivor Takato Michishita caught in my throat as I heard it: "if you sense it coming, it may be too late." Another powerful moment within the film surfaces at 00:07:24 as Weston recites the memory of Kimura Yoshihiro, a Hiroshima survivor in which "most people were silent. Everything turned yellow."

The English transcript of the Japanese audio is set below the soundwave, fluctuating in and out of focus in an anxious evocation of the impending catastrophe. The words glitch into the next sentence and in an unnerving echo of Yoshihiro's "there was a big sound...and everything went dark," the score surges. The orchestral strings seem to jar beside one another, building in a blur as the frame is overwhelmed by a burst of intense white. The silence that comes next seemed to fill the physical space in which I was viewing the film; one second of silence that has the weight of a thousand.

The exploration of sound is a powerful practice in art, and its absence is just as valuable. The moment of silence in *I Saw the World End* injects a compositional pause for reflection to fully absorb the gravity of the film's tone, specifically in regard to the bombing and its ongoing repercussions. A blinding flash overwhelms the frame to expose a black and white clip of a nuclear mushroom cloud, silence giving way to a low rumbling crescendo in arrangement with the ominous nature of the atomic bomb footage. At 00:07:51, with the skirt of the bomb's cloud splaying outwards, the film seems to heavily breathe in, and as if in response to the weight of nuclear consequence it sinks to the lower third of the frame. This post-explosion visual shift is not only compositional but transfers the resonance of the work to a contemporary setting. Devlin's quotation of a line from Robert Jay Lifton's *Still Waters: The Secret World of Lakes* (2017) in which the psychologist warns of "apocalyptic twins...climate change and nuclear arms, (that) can destroy the human species" is menacing, and in the current climate feels undeniable.

Art has an accountability. An accountability in the practice to record, to challenge, to provoke conversation. While many of us have had the privilege to be distanced from such horrors, for others it has been – and still is – increasingly present. The August premiere of *I Saw the World End* was originally scheduled for the public sphere of Piccadilly Circus.



Two days prior, an explosion devastated the city and people of Beirut, Lebanon, thus changing the dialogue around the work's intended presentation and resulting in a shift of its location to the London Imperial War Museum (Buck, 2020). The digital world initiates conversations on a global scale.

Art that effectively engages an audience is often characterised by a responsiveness to its past and contemporary context. *I Saw the World End* captures the fragility of our world (and our fleeting mortality) at the hands of humanity. The proliferation of the digital image through the medium of the internet carries with it the potential to enact change through conversation. The video work speaks to personal, societal and cultural spheres of trauma specific to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings that trigger a warning for our current political climate. At its politically charged moment of unveiling in August 2020, *I Saw the World End* captured a sensitivity. A sensitivity that has the potential to illuminate spaces of dark that we are yet to see so that history might not repeat itself once again.

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